



Best Practices: Communications and Customer Service

Communication is the key to good FOIA customer service. Here are some excellent communications strategies that OGIS has observed in agencies across the Government. Do you have customer service best practices that you would like to share? Drop us a line at ogis@nara.gov, or check out our blog at blogs.archives.gov/foiablog.

1. Set the tone

Your agency's FOIA Web pages provide a great opportunity to set the tone for your FOIA program and help potential requesters understand what they can expect. OGIS also recommends that agencies post in plain language information about fees, fee categories and fee waivers. In particular, it is important to explain the differences between categories and waivers and the criteria and process for each.

- ★ The FBI's FOIA Web site explains how to obtain records from the agency and what happens after a request is made, including how long processing generally takes.

FOIA regulations are a way to signal your agency's commitment to open government and customer service. You should also discuss OGIS and the services it offers in agency FOIA regulations.

- ★ The Departments of Education and Interior and 10 non-Cabinet level agencies have updated their FOIA regulations since the 2007 FOIA amendments. Such regulations outline agency-specific procedures governing the FOIA request process.

Finally, remember that the relationship between your agency and FOIA requesters is not the only relationship that matters. OGIS recommends that agencies develop intra- and inter-agency agreements (memoranda of understanding) regarding the processing of routine agency-specific documents, releases and withholdings to avoid or minimize the need for referral or consultation between agencies.

- ★ Technology can help: an Air Force FOIA officer created a process for the Department of Defense that uses a document sharing platform to streamline referrals and consultations.

2. Start the conversation

Once a FOIA request is made, your agency has an opportunity to lay the groundwork for clear, effective communication with the requester. OGIS recommends that agencies provide in writing to the requester the tracking number and contact information for the FOIA Public Liaison (FPL) and the FOIA professional assigned to the case as quickly as possible.

- ★ Several component offices within the Department of Agriculture immediately acknowledge FOIA requests with the name and telephone number of the FOIA professional assigned to the case.

Consider that many requesters may not have checked your online reading room before making their request. It may be worthwhile to double-check early in the process to see whether the requested information is already available.

- ★ A Forest Service FOIA analyst informed a requester who was willing to pay thousands of dollars to obtain records that he could easily download the data.

Processing delays result in many FOIA disputes, but OGIS has observed that these problems can often be alleviated by communicating clearly and directly with the requester, and providing a time estimate. OGIS highly recommends making these estimates as accurate as possible, even if the Agency is unable to make the 20-day response time required under the law.

3. Keep requesters informed

Once a FOIA request has been received and acknowledged, your agency can continue to practice good customer service communication. One approach is to create an online system to allow requesters to easily check the status of their requests.

- ★ The Environmental Protection Agency posts a simple weekly FOIA request status chart.

Large requests take a great deal of time to process, resulting in frustration for the requester and the agency. Partial releases can help alleviate this.

- ★ Many agencies, including the State Department, make rolling releases of information to requesters rather than waiting until processing concludes.

Keep in mind that while routine FOIA processes may be second nature to you, they represent a whole new language to many requesters. This is particularly important in the case of records referrals and consultations, including which agencies are involved and how to contact those agencies.

- ★ Several agencies – including the Department of Labor’s Employment Training Administration – created model letters to ensure that processes are explained clearly.

Clear communications are essential in the appeals process, as well. Include information about OGIS in final appeal letters, advising requesters that the Office can assist in resolving FOIA disputes as an alternative to litigation.

- ★ Standard OGIS language can be found at: www.archives.gov/ogis/standard-language.pdf.

4. Be accessible

The OPEN Government Act positions an agency’s FPL to be the public face of its FOIA program, providing information and helping to resolve conflicts. Agencies should widely publicize the FPL’s name and contact information.

An inability to reach FOIA staff is a surprisingly common requester complaint. OGIS recommends that agencies establish a general FOIA e-mail account. Also, set up FOIA professionals’ voice mail to accept messages, and check the account frequently.

Accessibility is important, but some agency FOIA staff members have expressed concern that establishing open communications with requesters could be too much of a good thing, resulting in less time to actually process requests.

- ★ The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) manages requester communications with a national FOIA hotline where callers can speak to a FOIA specialist.